

August 26, 2005- Coal Heritage Highway Authority Awards \$1M To Exhibition Coal Mine Visitor Center

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U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall (D-WV) announced today that the City of Beckley has been awarded \$1,000,000 through the Coal Heritage Highway Authority for the Exhibition Coal Mine Visitor and Interpretive Center.

"The Exhibition Coal Mine is one of the most visited coal-themed tourism destinations in the region. These funds will allow for expansion of the company-store-themed visitor and interpretive center that relates our coal heritage story to the more than 50,000 annual visitors who want a closer look at life in a coal camp," said Rep. Rahall.

In addition to the company store and interpretive center, funds will also be used for access improvements, including pedestrian and parking upgrades.

"Beckley is strategically positioned at the transportation crossroads of southern West Virginia to serve as a gateway to other coal theme destinations along the Coal Heritage Trail and National Coal Heritage Area. Any improvements to this attraction will have far-reaching benefits for southern West Virginia for years to come," said Rep. Rahall.

The Coal Heritage Trail is a national scenic byway winding past company stores, miners houses, massive railroad yards, coal tipples, and company towns. Visitors can experience coal society and gain remarkable insight into American history. The Coal Heritage Trail has benefited from the support of Rep. Rahall, the Federal Highway Administration and West Virginia Division of Highways.

An initiative of Congressman Nick Joe Rahall II, the idea of the National Coal Heritage Area was established in November 1996, when Congress passed into law the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act. The NCHA encompasses 11 counties in southern West Virginia: Boone, Cabell, Fayette, Logan, McDowell, Mercer, Mingo, Raleigh, Summers, Wayne, and Wyoming. The mission of the National Coal Heritage Area is to preserve, protect, and interpret lands, structures, and communities associated with the coal mining heritage of West Virginia.

National Heritage Area designation recognizes the coalfields of southern West Virginia as a treasure of national importance. This designation provides an opportunity to tell the story of the southern West Virginia coal mines to visitors from outside the region as well as local residents. Because it is a project that stresses partnerships, land ownership and land use decisions remain at the local level. At the same time, southern West Virginia will gain new prominence on national tourist maps.

"The ripple effect that tourism projects an essential key to job creation and economic development in southern West Virginia," Rahall said. "Along with Tourism, rounding out what I call the Three T's are Transportation and Technology. The three of these T's together hold the keys to the future prosperity of our region."

"Each of the three T's represents a leg on a stool. Each one of these legs is essential and we must foster growth in each area," Rahall said. "While I talk a lot about the importance of modern highways and transportation corridors and state of the art technology infrastructure to our region, I also always preach the important message of tourism development."

Christy Bailey, executive director of the Coal Heritage Highway Authority and the National Coal Heritage Area Authority, thanked Congressman Rahall for his support.

"The support Congressman Rahall has secured for the Coal Heritage Trail and the National Coal Heritage Area allows us to provide funding for worthwhile projects such as this and to continue our mission of preserving and promoting our rich coal heritage."

Bailey said her organization is excited about the partnership and she looks forward to seeing the impact the improvement will have on visitors.

"The Coal Heritage Highway Authority is pleased to provide this support for enhancements at the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine," Bailey said. "The Exhibition Coal Mine is an important site for the Coal Heritage Trail and the National Coal Heritage Area and the expansion and interpretation planned will provide visitors with a quality experience and entice them to learn more about the coal history of southern West Virginia by traveling the Coal Heritage Trail."